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AUTHOR Berkowitz, Dan
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ABSTRACT

Drawing on 2 months of intensive research in a network-affiliate newsroom, this paper describes how the researcher coped with studying newswork by qualitative and quantitative methods within a naturalistic paradigm and addresses methodological issues facing the naturalistic researcher. The paper discusses the following five methodological issues: (1) entree; (2) the role of the researcher; (3) data collection; (4) reliability assessment; and (5) incorporating the unexpected. The paper concludes that although the degree of certainty was not quite the same with the naturalistic approach as with purely quantitative measures, the naturalistic approach brought a greater depth of understanding than prestructured positivistic research typically would have developed. (RS)

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NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:

REFLECTING ON A NATURALISTIC CASE STUDY

Dan Berkowitz
Assistant Professor
School of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa 52242

(319) 335-5844
or
(319) 335-5821

BITNET: BLABRKPD@UIAMVS

CS 506829

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NOTES FROM THE NEWSROOM:

REFLECTING ON A NATURALISTIC CASE STUDY

Research concerning mass communication processes can be studied from a variety of approaches that can be boiled down to two main research philosophies. One, adhering to a social science philosophy often has been called "positivism."

A second approach, called "naturalism," (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) begins in a less-structured manner, first developing an informed background about the problem to be studied and then shaping data collection and analysis according to the context of the situation as the study evolves.

The purpose of this paper is to convey a sense of how I coped with studying newswork by qualitative and quantitative methods within a naturalistic paradigm. As some scholars have pointed out, the positivist-naturalist debate isn't split by quantification, but by the guiding research philosophy (Christians & Carey, 1989). The context that frames this discussion is a study of a network-affiliate television news department, where I focused on the decision-making process of the people who worked there. Although the examples discussed in this paper are context-specific, they

also serve a broader purpose by adding a real-life character to an otherwise philosophy-centered debate.

THE NATURALISTIC APPROACH

The mode of inquiry called naturalism (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) presents a philosophical alternative to the positivist research tradition that has dominated mass communication studies (Gitlin, 1983). Five main axioms differentiate the two research philosophies. These axioms can be summarized as follows (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 36-38):

1. The nature of reality. Positivism suggests that there is one knowable reality; naturalism suggests that many realities can be constructed from the same situation.

2. Role of the researcher. Positivism suggests that social research is independent of the people who are studied; naturalism asserts that the researcher is unavoidably in an interactive situation with those people.

3. Generalizing research findings. Positivism believes that findings can be generalized largely without concern for the context of a specific situation; naturalism believes that any working hypotheses developed in research are bound by time and context.

4. Determining causality. A tenet of positivism is that a good research design can unearth causal relationships in a system; naturalism, in contrast, operates under the assumption that elements within a system mutually influence each other, so that causes often cannot be separated from effects.

5. Objectivity of research. A belief of positivism is that researchers can and should shed personal values during data collection and analysis; naturalism suggests that this is not possible, but instead that all research is influenced by the values of the researcher, the choice of research paradigm, and the guiding theoretical foundation.

The comparisons above suggest that the difference between the approaches doesn't lie in whether words or

numbers are used to gain understanding, but in the philosophy that guides data collection and interpretation. Research under the naturalistic paradigm, whether qualitative or quantitative, begins through initial decisions drawn from the existing literature. These initial decisions are then modified by increased understanding of the research situation's context. As a result, naturalistic research design becomes emergent rather than preplanned, yielding a context-sensitive construction of the situation being studied (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, pp. 221-249).

This paper addresses five methodological issues facing the naturalistic researcher. The first issue deals with entree. Cooperation from the people being studied becomes crucial. The range of activities that are permitted will shape a researcher's breadth and depth of understanding. Naturalistic inquiry also requires a relatively prolonged exposure to the research situation; the researcher needs some assurance that the proposed duration of study can be accommodated.

A second methodological issue concerns the role of the researcher in the research setting. To fully experience a situation, the researcher needs to become a part of that situation. Sharing daily routines, blending into group culture, and developing a native sense of that culture all enhance the quality of experience and understanding (Bruyn, 1966).

A third methodological consideration addresses data collection. The naturalistic researcher strives to gain a depth of experience within a setting, but people inevitably react to being observed and interviewed. This reactivity shapes the research insights that follow. As such, a researcher must consider the balance between natural curiosity and intrusion into the everyday workings of the organization. Other methodological considerations concern how initial concepts can be made more sensitive, and how triangulation of methods and perspectives (Christians & Carey, 1989) can be incorporated into verifying and modifying an ever-changing working hypothesis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reliability assessment presents a fourth dilemma. Both researcher and reader need to develop a confidence that data collection has been consistent and coherent (Fortner & Christians, 1989). At the same time, data collection unavoidably remains a construction of the research design, the events that are witnessed, and the researcher's existing interests and biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ideally, a researcher should devise a means of assessing reliability that can be accomplished within the bounds of the study context.

A fifth methodological consideration relates to incorporating the unexpected in the overall assessment of a situation. No matter how well-prepared the researcher, new information will surface, new twists will appear in the relationships being studied, and new problems will call for

resolution. The way a researcher handles the unexpected can either enhance the outcome of a study or present conclusions that have been developed using see-through blinders (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A naturalistic researcher acknowledges that the unexpected will likely appear and eagerly attempts to adapt in order to gain a better understanding of the situation.

THE STUDY SETTING

This paper draws from approximately two months of intensive research in a network-affiliate television station newsroom in Indianapolis, Indiana (media market size 24). I spent ten hours a day in the newsroom, four days a week, for most of that period. My focus was on selection decisions newsworkers made about potential stories the evening newscast.

My study involved a mixed-method design -- part qualitative and part quantitative. Both methods were guided by a naturalistic perspective. The numeric findings, therefore, were not interpreted as absolute evidence of how the news process works in local television. Instead, I looked at these quantitative data as a way of organizing and structuring what I was seeing.

The qualitative data offered the opportunity for both interpretation and organization of quantitative results, and for developing a greater sense of understanding. Further,

the qualitative data were analyzed first to avoid being directed by the numbers.

The following sections provide examples of how I incorporated naturalistic inquiry into my study.

ACCOMPLISHING ENTREE

Before the study began, I started to develop some anxiety about studying newsworkers on the job. It was as if somebody would be turning the tables on them and "doing journalism" on their journalism. To prepare for this, I reviewed several studies of newswork to see what others had done, but I found that only a few shared experiences in much detail. Altheide (1976) and Epstein (1973), for example, both had agonized about access and cooperation. Fishman (1980) pondered the potential influence of reading observation notes from somebody else who had studied the same newspaper.

Although I was concerned I might not find a television station to study, I was equally concerned about finding a station that wasn't atypical. The best way of ensuring success on both counts, I decided, was through somebody in the J-School who had industry contacts. The person I talked with brought up some of his concerns about research on TV news. Some researchers, he thought, had breached a television station's trust, ending up on bad terms with those people and ruining opportunities for other researchers and student interns. He warned that I should remember to speak

with newsworkers in their own terms and try not to appear more knowledgeable than I really was. He also urged that I avoid sounding as if I believed their work was "influenced" by forces they couldn't control.

Eventually a meeting was arranged with a news director. At the television station, a receptionist led me into the news director's cubicle and left me there to watch soap operas on three silent TV sets. More than an hour later, the news director came in. As I sat nervously facing him, I opened my small red notebook to the first page, where I had carefully written out a list of what I hoped to do. Amazingly, as I discussed my wish list with the news director, he agreed to everything I asked.

This was quite a pleasant surprise. After reading Epstein's <u>News From Nowhere</u> and Altheide's <u>Creating Reality</u> I was ready for some limitations on what I could do. Epstein was restricted from regularly attending story conferences and decision-making meetings at CBS. Altheide twice was called into the news director's office and nearly asked to end his research after breaking some of the established ground rules.

But the news director at the station I studied presented none of those obstacles. "We've got nothing to hide," he told me during that first meeting. He and some of the others at the station felt they owed something to their profession, he explained; allowing me to study his newsroom was a way of paying back the profession. As I headed out the door of his office, he called to me, "None of this Mr. Hinkle shit...call

me Steve...okay? You got it?" It seemed that there would be no restrictions on what I could do in the newsroom, and throughout the study, I found this to be the case.

DEVELOPING A RESEARCH ROLE

At first, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. What would my role be? How should I interact with the newsworkers? I tape recorded some notes during my drive home after the first few sessions, and my thoughts often touched on these kinds of questions. I was afraid of allowing too much of myself to emerge during conversations -- after all, I wasn't there to have them study me. At the same time, though, I didn't want to appear too much the judgmental academic. Striking a balance was difficult for a while, especially because I really didn't feel comfortable interacting with the newsroom humor. It was part of a culture I was not familiar with.

I also spent some time deciding how to dress for the newsroom, because my goal was to blend into the newsroom culture. The first few days I showed up with a plaid shirt, a tie, and a sports coat. Soon, though, I noticed that the standard dress for producers and editors in this newsroom was a white shirt and a red or yellow power tie, but no coat. I picked up a few white shirts and some new neckties and wore those the rest of my time in the newsroom. No coat.

At my first morning story conference I was introduced to most -- but not all -- of the reporters, producers, and

editors. As an effort to minimize their reactivity to my being there, I described my research purpose only in broad terms: I was studying news decision-making. During the next two weeks, though, people would come by and curiously make little comments or ask questions. "What are you doing?" "Learning anything yet?" "Are you a student intern?" Again, it was difficult deciding what to say.

In another effort to minimize reactivity, I eased into the situation by not taking any written notes for the first few days, instead dictating notes on my microcassette recorder in the car on the way home. It's a good way to miss your freeway exit. When I finally began taking notes in the newsroom after a few days, I tried to wait until a conversation ended and the newsworker got back to business before I wrote anything down. Again, this was an effort to avoid making them any more self-conscious than they already were.

After a few days in the newsroom, though, the midday producer approached me at one of the videotape editing booths. "There's a rumor going around that you're the new Magid consultant," he told me. All of the sudden I realized why the news anchors had been smiling as they walked by. "Don't deny it, enjoy it," the producer advised me. I liked the idea -- the consultant charged something like $130,000 a year, the producer said.

This wasn't the only time that people speculated about what I was doing. Several days later, I was standing next to

the five o'clock producer as he cursed, banged his fists, and generally worried about his show. From out of the eerie darkness of the surrounding electronic equipment, the station's statehouse reporter suddenly walked up, smiling broadly, and turned to me: "Now I know who you are. You're the new director, aren't you?" It was difficult to tell him that I wasn't. A few minutes later, the continuity director walked by and asked me the same question.

After a few weeks in the newsroom, I too began to feel self-conscious. Whenever I wasn't taking notes, for example, I either kept the notebook closed or turned to a blank page. I felt that the newsworkers' curiosity was increasing about what I was writing down. As a further caution, I learned how to scribble my field notes so that I could still read them, but that would make little sense to somebody else.

The point is, my role as an observer in the newsroom made people curious and a bit self-conscious. I wondered how to handle this, but did nothing special. Eventually, the newsworkers stopped being curious. During story conferences, though, they continued to remember I was there whenever they used slang or four-letter words. For example, during a discussion about three people who were going to be sentenced in court for a gruesome crime, the six o'clock producer referred to the criminals as "scumbags" and then he turned to me. "'Scumbags' just made it into your paper, I guess," the producer commented a little nervously.

Another concern was how to deal with suggestions counter to my research needs. Several reporters told me, for example, that I should go out to watch them cover stories. One even suggested that I create a story myself, complete with an on-camera standup. I didn't want to disagree with her, but still, it would have taken me away from my research focus. I never did take up the reporter's suggestion.

Probably the most uncomfortable times came when I was sitting at the news desk, the phones were ringing, the five o'clock producer was rushing to finish his scripts, and nobody was around to answer the phones. A simple solution I often used was to leave the desk for awhile and observe the photographers editing their videotapes. One afternoon though, I was at the news desk and people were hard at work putting together the newscast. Phones were ringing and deadlines were drawing closer. Suddenly, the six o'clock producer turned to me, feeling a bit helpless and annoyed. He suggested that it was time I learned how to answer the phones. "A few phones will do you some good...and put that in your damn book," he said somewhat sarcastically.

I had to just let the phones keep ringing, though, because if I began to answer them, I might have turned into a student intern and general go-fer. This would have, of course, kept me from seeing the things I was there to see. For most of my time in the newsroom people were understanding, but in situations like this I really felt in the way. One time, the assignment editor even defended my

decision not to answer the phones to the six o'clock producer. My impression was that he was trying to protect my "scientific objectivity."

GATHERING DATA AND SORTING OUT THE DAY

If there were some uneasy times in the newsroom, I'd have to say that the good times outweighed them. The newsworkers loved to talk about their work. Sometimes -- even when they were really too busy -- the newsworkers would take time to answer my questions or point out something they thought would interest me.

When I conducted individual interviews at the conclusion of my data collection, nearly all told me that they were busy, but that they could make the time. Although I asked for fifteen minutes, they often got so involved in our discussions that I'd have to stop them after an hour so that I could stay on schedule. Most of the newsworkers, in contrast, didn't even look at their watches.

During the interviews, I realized how much of the news process was intuitive. For example, when I asked about their feelings of professionalism, some of the newsworkers seemed never to have thought about the issue before, or even to have considered themselves as members of a profession.

Something I vowed not to do during my data collection was to get involved with newsroom politics. When newsworkers talked about their concerns related to story assignments, for example, I listened carefully, but kept my notebook closed.

Often, I wrote some notes about the discussion a little while later. Rather than asking other people to comment on these concerns, I waited for the subject to appear again in newsworkers' conversations. This precaution seemed worthwhile, because it kept me from getting entangled in newsroom politics and alienating any of the people I was studying.

Taking notes during story conferences seemed impossible at first. Conversations moved quickly and they were fragmented, skipping from one story to the middle of another. I think a person heading into a TV newsroom for observation would do well to follow the station's newscasts for several weeks in advance. Learn the names of the reporters. Develop a sense of the big stories in the news. This enhanced sense of context will speed acclimatization.

I also found that I could improve my understanding of story conference decisions by skimming the morning paper once I got back to the news desk. This filled in details and provided background for what the newsworkers had discussed. The information I learned from the newspapers also helped clarify coding decisions for my quantitative data and helped improve the accuracy of my field notes.

There were times, though, when I wasn't able to build a good sense of why newsworkers had skimmed over some potential stories with little or no discussion. In these situations, I found it helpful to take the managing editor or assignment editor aside for a few minutes and ask about these stories.

Either of the two provided me with one sentence commentaries like, "Boring, and besides, we're out of bodies," or "The news release was too vague and the topic is of limited interest." Their insights provided a better understanding of their decision-making process than I was able to develop on my own.

I also found it didn't hurt to admit when I didn't understand something. For example, when I heard during a story conference that they planned "a MOS about a GMA story," I found out that they planned to do a man-on-the-street story based on an item on Good Morning America. The newsworkers didn't think any less of me for asking.

A final point deals with flexibility. My initial measures and concepts came from the mass communication literature and from whatever personal experience I could apply. Although the measures seemed good at first, as my experience increased, they fit the situation less and less. Even though I allowed two weeks to become familiar with the situation before creating these measures, it wasn't really enough. In the end, several of the measures on my coding sheet changed, both in the terms that were used and in the definitions employed. It was either this or continuing on with predetermined measures that really didn't fit the situation. This doesn't mean that the data weren't reliable over time, however. What really happened was that I started understanding better the complexities of what I was doing.

THE ISSUE OF RELIABILITY ASSESSMENT

As I got deepter into data collection, a new issue began to surface: the question of reliability. Assessing the reliability of observational data presented a more difficult task than assessing reliability of traditional research such as content analysis.

Part of the problem is that data boundaries in naturalistic inquiry are less clearly defined than data boundaries in content analysis. Researchers will interpret a situation differently and focus on different details as well. As a consequence, traditional positivist approaches to evaluating reliability seem likely to present trustworthy data as low in reliability.

In my study, I was trying to assess the influence of six elements that appear in the literature of newswork -- information subsidy, news values, technology, resource constraints, typification, and profit orientation. Most of this body of literature doesn't discuss the issue of reliability. One reason may be that the majority of these studies have been qualitative, rather than quantitative, and reliability was not brought up by the researcher because it wasn't the norm for that mode of inquiry. My research, however, was based on newsroom observation that gathered both qualitative and quantitative data and the case for quantitative data seemed different -- when numbers are used to analyze a situation, readers' reliability standards seem to shift. Although a quantitative observational study still

represents a researcher's personal construction of a situation, the introduction of numbers signals to many readers that a single "true" version of a situation can and will be revealed.

Here is how reliability was assessed for my newsroom data. Before data collection began, a second person spent one full day in the newsroom, going about the same daily routine that I had followed in previous visits. His day began by attending the morning story conference, taking notes while potential stories were discussed. After the conference, observation moved to the news desk, but because of limited space, it was not possible to have both observers sit there at the same time. Even if that had been possible, it still would have been difficult to ensure that both observers heard identical conversations from the same point of view, and with the same background knowledge of each situation.

On the hour-long drive home, I talked with the second observer about the day's events, discussing whether <u>any</u> one person could observe enough of the kinds of activities that needed to be observed to complete the code sheets I had developed for assessing decision-making in individual news stories. Our discussion suggested that, yes, it was possible. We did decide, though, that two people could not take identical notes from different newsroom locations, and that I needed to develop another approach for determining reliability.

The second observer helped with the reliability check, bringing his familiarity with the newsroom context as a valuable and important tool. This person coded potential stories I had previously coded, based on a discussion of the original observation notes from one reasonably typical day. This seemed more plausible than trying to double-code stories from actual newsroom observation. In all, twenty-five potential news items were coded from my original notes during three two-hour coding sessions.

INCORPORATING EMERGENT MEASURES

As the study evolved, four additional elements in the news decision-making process emerged, elements for which I had no quantitative data, but which I wanted to integrate into my overall quantitative framework. From a naturalistic perspective, this additional information needed to be included as I refined my working hypothesis.

In the positivistic approach, this new information would prove unsettling at best, defining a measurement scheme as faulty. Essentially, a positivist devises a system of measurement and then takes his or her lumps. Although a predetermined measurement scheme might not turn out to correspond to a situation, a positivist nonetheless would not adapt a measurement scheme as a study unfolded.

Evaluating the new set of ten news elements -- six original ones and four new ones -- presented a challenge, because only qualitative data were available for the four new

elements. My goal was to portray the relative importance of all ten elements -- news values, resource limits, newscast format, information subsidy, occurrence information, other media, story frame, reporter experiences, technology, station management -- when considered as a group, something that might be considered a "qualitative regression analysis." Without quantitative data for the emerging measures, though, I needed to create my own method.

First, I carefully examined the observation notes and created a preliminary list. My list split the ten elements into four levels of importance, and further ranked the elements within each level.

This list and other findings were taken back to the newsroom and discussed with six news decision-makers: the news director, assistant news director, two evening producers, the assignment editor, and the weekend producer. I asked them about my tentative ordering of the ten elements, as well as about any other elements that might have been overlooked. Their suggestions were used to further refine the rankings in a negotiated outcome between myself and the people I was studying.

I also developed a preliminary process model for news decision-making that resembled a path diagram used for causal modeling, which I discussed with the six news decision-makers. All six generally agreed with the form and content of the model, although the five o'clock producer explained that my approach was much more formal than the way he thought

about his work. He referred to the model as "school stuff," adding that he had worked in television news for seven years, and the whole time, he hadn't stopped to analyze the process formally.

An evening producer looked over the model and suggested a different form based on his experience in computer programming, a flow diagram that allowed for parallel processing of inputs (potential news stories) and incorporating decision diamonds where the flow of decision possibilities could go in two or three ways. His idea was incorporated into a revised model based on existing theory, data analysis, and feedback from the news decision-makers.

CONCLUSION

I'll never be sure that I saw everything I should have seen, heard everything I should have heard, or even if I understood anything correctly. No matter how hard I tried, I found that taking a naturalistic approach to the study of newswork brought a fair amount of uncertainty. Several times I had to remind myself that the outcome of naturalistic studies -- and positivistic studies --becomes the researcher's personal construction, rather than a portrayal of one "true" reality.

Discussions with newsworkers about my early findings helped develop and refine my thinking about news decision-making. I never felt that my degree of certainty was quite the same as with purely quantitative endeavors, a certainty

that might have been unfoundedly certain. In return, though, the naturalistic approach brought a greater depth of understanding than prestructured positivistic research typically would have developed.

Surely, the examples I have offered for applying naturalistic concepts to one particular case study cannot be read as a prescription for newsroom research. Research situations are too diverse, complex, and complicated for that expectation. My hope here instead is that other researchers can benefit by exploring how one researcher has confronted some important methodological issues and then considering the transferability of these solutions to the context of their own research situations. Experience, however gained, is a key ingredient to understanding in naturalistic inquiry.

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